

THE BLIND SINGER

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"DON'T you know the blind singer?"

"No Sir, I don't."

"Have you never heard of him: the jolly wanderer of the Saguenay? Nobody would think of calling him a beggar; that's what he is, P'tit Louis Simard called L'Aveugle, whom everybody loves because he brings news, letters, fun, and a bagful of tunes, of yarns . . ."

"Why no, I'm new to this part of the country. Please, tell me more about him!"

"Well then, most of the year he tramps his way all alone, pulling his little cart, from Mille-Vaches (a Thousand Cows, which means Sea Cows) to Tadoussac, then across the Saguenay to St. Irenee for the feast of St. Ann at the end of July. When this is done, for good measure often he goes up to Chicoutimi and Lake St. John."

"Phew! What a distance for a blind fellow, in a land almost without roads, with settlements only few and far between!"

"Yes, hundreds of miles."

"Only in the summer, no doubt?"

"Usually yes! As soon as the bustards and the wild geese return in the spring, he piles his bag of tricks—his fiddle, his accordion, his *bioune* (a hammer and string instrument), his flute, etc.—on his little cart, and he is on his way."

"You just said: Usually? Do you mean that he may go out, at times, in the winter?"

"Certainly! He often journeys on to Tadoussac for supplies, or the opposite way, northeast, to Portneuf. Pulling at a sleigh, he stays away three or four days."

"He is a wonder for a blind man. Does he never get lost? Any mishap in his life!"

"None, so far as can be remembered."

"Truly this sounds to me like another yarn from the Saguenay. I'll take it with a grain of salt."

"My dear Sir, you need not. You may see him with your own eyes."

"You don't say so! Where? When? How?"

"Very well, you shall. Get ready for the boat to-morrow, pack up your phonograph, take plenty of blanks for new records. He's worth while: a folk singer such as you have never met."

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He reels off hundreds of sings, beginning with *Pyrame et Thisbee*

"Never heard of this song. What is it?"

"250 lines in all: the sad story of the lovers of Babylon town long before Romeo and Juliet. In *Romeo*, it's poison that brings the tale to an end. In *Pyramus*, it's a lioness in the desert."

"How exciting! Yes, we'll leave to-morrow. I must get that ballad for the National Museum."

The next day, thirty full years ago, Mr. Tache and I left les Eboulements together on the Canada Steamship boat for St. Irene, the next port of call northeast. There was no railway as yet between Quebec and Murray Bay, and the district, in all seasons but summer, remained in splendid isolation. It was asleep like the Princess awaiting a kiss to awaken her. Immersed for the first time in folk-songs and fairy tales I was collecting them in impressive numbers—I nearly believed myself in fairyland. Turn the page, and here is another wonder story! Mr. Tache, the King's Printer, was my cicerone. Like me, he had his mind open to the fantasies of the Kingdom of Saguenay. And Louis L'Aveugle was now our magnet. May he follow his custom, and be there for us to behold him, to listen to him, the wild Orpheus of Canada!

We landed at St. Irene at night, three days before the feast of St. Ann. The morning after we arrived, we were delighted to hear that Louis L'Aveugle had preceded us and was staying somewhere in the village, nobody knew exactly where, for he was always welcome wherever he chose. As we were expectantly taking a stroll between two rows of habitant houses basking in sunshine, we saw him coming along slowly, his long cane forward like the antenna of an insect, holding his head high like Mr. Forget, the local magnate, his eyes wide open in perpetuity. He seemed to have seen us, for he crossed the road to meet us. "Bonjour, Ti-Louis!" Mr. Tache greeted him. He was surprised, for his caller was an outsider, seldom met hereabouts. Before acknowledging the salutation, he planted his cane in the ground, and, for composure perhaps, he began to hum:

Ma mère m'a donné un violon,
 Me l'a donné à quatre cordons.
 Moi j'ai frotté de l'arcanson
 Sur l'archet en erin d'étafon.
 Allons-y, belle, frapp' du talon,
 Danse la ronde, le cotillon

Mother has given me a fiddle.
 On it were four strings.
 Rub and rub the bow with resin,
 The bow made of a stallion's hair.
 Stand up, pretty stamp your heel
 It's time for the roundelay

"Monsieur de la Broquerie!" he said, raising his battered hat as a villain of yore might have done before a seignior. Yes, he triumphantly remembered him, and he prided himself on remembering by the mere tone of the voice, or even the sound of the footstep, of anyone he had met before. Then he turned to me, and said: "Bonjour," to provoke an answer. I was brand new to him. He wanted to know what had brought me to his village, for the anniversary of St. Ann.

"Come in and sit down!" he said, with the home feeling of a lord on his estate. We walked in right there. The hostess, unknown to either of us, graciously invited us to sit down. I did my best to explain what other singers of folk-songs fail to understand at first, that I had come to hear songs, to take them down in writing, on the phonograph. He at once grasped my meaning and seemed perfectly well at home with the subject. What else for him to expect! Singing songs, telling tales, was his business, from the ground up. Gladly he would tell us, sing for us, play for us, all we wanted to hear, from the time Adam and Eve were born, and Eve, for our everlasting misfortune, bit into the apple under a tree. I pulled my little red notebook from my pocket, and Adam and Eve hurried down on to a new page in black and white. The mood truly had arisen for poem and tune. But Louis stopped, he did not mean to go farther into that story, at least for the time being. The improvised hostess at this stage gave us a cup of coffee. How kind of her, to mere strangers!

Would he sign *Pyrame et Thisbee*? We were so much interested in it. Our wish made him smile with satisfaction. Strangers came a long way for this tale of ancient lovers. He was pleased but nothing was forthcoming. I had to try and prime the pump as it were, by asking questions. So he began.

Deux jouvenceaux jadis d'amour é tant épris
 D'une égale tendresse
 Dont Pyrame est l'amant et Thisbée la maîtresse.
 Babylone étant le lieu
 D'ou ils vinrent tous deux
 D'une illustre famille . . .

Soon after, he stopped, far short of the 250 lines I had heard of and the full measure of the tragic adventure. I was disappointed. Mr. Tache, too. We exchanged glances. "Why not go on, he had started so well?" Yes, he would go on, but not just now. We wondered aloud at the reason for the delay. He added, "In a few days perhaps a week." We had come a long way to listen to him. Must we go back empty-handed?

We were not the only ones from afar, he reminded me. He had journeyed all the way on foot from Mille-Vaches near Labrador; that is not next door! In spots, he had to wait for the tide to ebb, before getting past the cliffs. I tried to coax him, straightway offered him so much per hour, so much more per day, just to do what he was used to do, what he knew so well how to do. But money went nowhere with him. I must wait until the next week. The good reason was this. Every year, he made this pilgrimage to St. Irenee, his cradle. At the feast of St. Ann, he confessed his sins to the good priest, for Holy Communion. A serious affair! His house-cleaning, no less. This would change him into a cherub, all white and wings, a nimbus around his grey head. The search for his sins was like hunting for fleas in a stack of hay; it took him days and days. Meanwhile no songs, no tale, no dance, no fiddle, no pipe, no *bioune*. They were worldly, a bit sinful, Pyramus like the rest. Before parting for a week as we must, I tried a joke, and said: "It cannot really be so bad. You are not such a sinner. You don't kiss the girls, with this long pipe of yours!" At the moment, he was lighting a pipe fully twelve inches long! His parting shot was: "Je change mon fusil d'épaule." (When I go fowling, I shoulder my .22!)

For a week, Mr. Tache and I went into the mountains, to hunt for folklore. We had our choice between the Turkeys, the Rams, the Wolves, the Porpoises, and the Eels. These are the nicknames the villagers forty miles around call each other. Why the Turkeys, the name for the Murray-Bay folk? Because they raise turkeys. Why the Rams, for the Eboulements people? Because they are stubborn. Why the porpoise, for the Hazel-Nut islanders opposite? Because they catch schools of porpoises every spring and fall, in their fish nets. Why the wolves, for the Baie-St.-Paul villagers? Because they were thievish; in fact, no more thievish than the others—perhaps less. And such stories!

When the day came for our appointment with Louis the Blind, I wondered whether he had remembered it or had gone

fowling elsewhere. He was there on the dot, his hair and beard neatly trimmed—it was all his own handling—but without a halo, so far as we could see. We sat down at once to work, I taking the narratives in shorthand, and the songs on the phonograph. He understood the requirements to perfection and seemed to enjoy this business-like way—new to him, no doubt—of disposing of his large repertory. Probably he felt flattered as an artist with an appreciative audience. It seemed a tardy recognition from abroad.

One song followed another, from Pyramus two thousand years ago, to the wanderings of the Lord at the edge of the Sea of Galilee—like his own, on the North Shore—to the Martyrdom of St. Catherine at Rome, to the lamentable tragedies of the Middle Ages, to the drinking songs of all times, to the love lyrics of springtime and courtship, to the shortcomings of married life—why not call them strife, and be done with?—to the hop and diddle of the folk dances, to the fun and nonsense so dear to all, because they blot out the common hardships and gild the pill of life . . .

Two or three days later, I was still greedy for more. All this to me was poetry, tunes galore, wealth, and beauty. "Hola!" he exclaimed. "Friend, wait a minute! You mistake me for a song book. You turn the page, and there is the damn thing. But here, the devil is in my song! (*Le diable est dans la chanson!*)" And he turned his brain inside out, to find the first line of the next song, which he knew well. The whole trouble usually occurred with the first word. Once he had fallen upon it, the rest moved on like clock-work.

Before the end of the third day, to my distress my phonograph cylinders ran out; I had not expected such a harvest in so little time. But 93 songs rested in my bag, and some of the best, too. As the next boat called only the following morning, and we had nothing definite to do for a few hours, Mme. Simard, the hostess, decided to give a *veillee*. There we would hear more tales as they were usually told, with trimmings and the full spread of histrionic talent.

The *veillee* began early; even before dark, all the invited revellers had arrived. Pere Mailloux was there, the most dramatic of all folk-tale tellers. His diction was fine, and his delivery, unmatched; he proved a real artist, with a touch of the stage. Mme. Jean Bouchard the singer of *complaintes* or come-all-ye's hailed from Goose Cape (*Cap-aux-Oies*). And several others were ready for the fray; they would vie with

one another in telling yarns, jerking off *tordions* or dance tunes and sharing in the fun.

The folk said, sang, and did, so much in quick tempo, that they grew thirsty. But the hostess had only root beer to offer, and she felt sorry. Fortunately, Mr. Tache and I had foreseen the emergency. We were bricks!, so we were told. The picture was conjured of the Golden Age, not so long ago. *Rhum, jamaïque, and curacao*, in those remote times, then flowed as if from a spring. Bootleg pure and simple it had all been for sure, for the men on this coast always were fine sailors, traveling long distances in their own hulls, combing the seas, to Anticosti, Newfoundland, and St. Pierre and Miquelon. They brought back barrels of fine spirits and liqueurs, all of it so cheap, next to nothing. They hid the goods in their barns. Then they traded them to thirsty souls for a penny a drink. Bootleggers made quite a bit out of it, but never grew wealthy; indeed they remained poor, most of them poorer than the rest. Never mind! tears almost came to the eyes of those who had known better times.

The *veillée* would not be complete without another spurt from our star singer, Ti-Louis L'Aveugle. Someone called his name, but without response, this time. He sat in a corner, fast asleep, perhaps a bit tired, or maybe overcome by the heavy percentage of the libation. At the moment, he might have gushed forth with a drinking song:

Bacchus, assis sur un tonneau,
Faisait la guerre aux buveurs d'eau. . .
(Bacchus, sitting on a barrel,
Wages war upon the water drinkers . . .)

But he stayed mum, on the verge of snoring. Someone, a bit apologetic to us strangers, said, "That's what he often does. He sleeps sitting all night, no matter what goes on around him." Soon we departed into the night, from the mountainous land of yore and make-believe.

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Thirty years down the ladder of time are quickly scaled, only too quickly. They bring us from 1916 almost to the present year. And I am writing this sketch in the heart of the Saguenay, at Tadoussac, where everybody old enough likes to chatter about Louis L'Aveugle, Boily the bone-setter, Belleau the yellow-haired potter, and Pere Cote the village crier. In these thirty years, there have been casualties, alas! All but Cote

have passed out, and posterity is already at work around their memory. Nothing stands still, in its workshop. It is a hothouse of legends, yarns, tall tales.

Louis L'Aveugle, for one, died at 68 years of age of the Spanish 'flu, two years after I had secured a good part of his repertory. In the past month I have consulted many of his contemporaries about him and his nomadic life. Marie Martel his niece, now old and white-haired, said that he died in her house like a child. At night he was late to go up to bed. His niece enquired about the fuss he was making, scraping, humming sighing. He could not sleep, for he was all astir, God knows why! He did not dare go out in the cold—it was October—to saw wood, a favorite night-killer with him. To him night or day made no great difference, and he often turned the one into the other. The next morning, he was sitting up in the rocker, fast asleep. His niece called him: "Oncle Ti-Louis!" He did not move. She touched his hand. It was cold. "Things at once went black for her (*C'était noir, quand il est parti*). The calamity, in the Martel family, was the more deeply felt in that it comprised a number of children, and the alms and earnings harvested by the blind singer went round without stint. His was a golden heart, for he died without a dime he could call his own.

His only possessions were his neat garments, his felt hat, and his trim boots (*bottes sauvages*) half way up to the knee, his large brass snuff box, his large pipe, his Montagnais embroidered tobacco pouch, and his musical instruments: fiddle, accordion, flute, which the people called whistle or clarionet, his *bioune*, also known under the name of piano, jew's harp, and a phonograph which he was trying to build, yet which ever failed to pick up any sound but the most unearthly. These things soon were dispersed, stolen, or wandered away of their own mysterious accord. The cart and the cane were the first to disappear. As soon as the bustards and the white geese returned in their migrations, one morning before dawn, the cart wheels began to turn and to purr. They rattled past the neighbouring houses. The vehicle had left only traces of its exit, apparently drawn by the ghost of the blind singer. The cane also had vanished. Never was it seen again, but it was heard. It is still heard at times by those who have seen Ti-Louis plant it in the ground in front of him, tap it with his long *canif* or folding knife, lend an ear to its report, and then feel assured of exactly where he stood. This cane was a magic wand, it had ears like him—very keen ears; it possessed even more:

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A poor man like Louis L'Aveugle must have been somewhat of a saint. His opinions that come through the press must have been somewhat of a canon. In his opinion seldom canonises its own saint. "Decidedly he was not a saint." "Bacca" (Rebecca) Tremblay, sitting in a knit woollen toque, at the ripe old age of thirty, gave her opinion, the other day. "Not a bit of it, *vices*." He knew the taste of all sin. He was addicted to some extremities; he kept his bed stay up for eight days and nights for the same period. Nothing would induce him. If the house caught fire, he would have danced when he played the fiddle or when his fun was to chase after the girls. "Do it!" added old "Bacca," who shrugged her drooping shoulders. He apparently knew it only too well. The only way to grasp the resources of a Ti-Lou was to call for her pipe; for women and tobacco. And for sure they knew their tobacco.

Shorn of sight though he had, the Singer had developed other faculties. It is told how he, casually, met Xavier, a cripple of the Escoumains. By means of the deaf and dumb fellow did his wishes express themselves. He managed to get face to face with Louis L'Aveugle, who was too funny for words. Few could have enjoyed the fun and laughter.

Well-wishers—they always meddled. They decided, one day when Louis was ailing, to pack him up and send him by sailing to the nuns' Institute for the Blind where he would learn how to read pin points with his fingers. He was an educated man. After a few months he returned, having enjoyed the trip with rough fellows and coming empty-handed. True, he could decipher a page punched in heavy paper. But of what use was he if he could not express or hear other than those dull pages that the we

big stone house in the heart of the city
wanderer of the North Coast. Yes, a
to know. The inmates all sat, or stood,
sheep. That was odious! He wanted
as the proverbial wolf in the pen. But
chance. Once or twice, he had escaped
back, on the street. He wished to "see"
and brought back. No regimentation
ings of this "wild" fellow for music and
to get everybody on the move. But
ent and, too often for him, silence, the
him so sorely. At night, when he could
rove all over the establishment, and
ers or restraint. Once he was found in
erving himself a hearty meal; another
the quarter of the novices, who were
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